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Literature and the evolution of religious discourse: A concluding essay

John C. Hawley

You know how to interpret the face of the earth
and the sky. How is it you do not know how to
interpret these times? (Luke 12:56)

Religion and literature do not play identical roles in society, but they both rely heavily on imagination. This book has provided an examination of representative writings from both fields to demonstrate this fact, and to suggest points at which the differences between the two disciplines become less important. Viewed together, these examples raise interesting questions regarding the viability of discussing enduring truths outside the realms of imagination. This paradox, in turn, points to the limitations of rationality in the pursuit of such truths, and the inevitability of subjectivity in the quest for the objectively true.

These are important philosophical questions, but some readers will be more interested in the historical and sociological aspects of the topic. Some may characterize the trajectory traced by these chapters as an example of Arnold Toynbee's model for the collapse of a civilization — the civilization in question here being western Christianity. The first six studies focus on the words of Scripture, especially as they were reflected upon in sermons to imagine the end of time, and to call the congregation to personal conversion: as it happens, all six chapters demonstrate the sense of crisis culminating in the Reformation. A return to *the Word* was seen to be the best and effective Response to the clarion Challenge heard throughout Europe (I here use Toynbee's vocabulary for the dialectical movement typical within civilizations). Subsequent chapters in this volume, however, use a similar vocabulary but take an increasingly secular tone. The movement in many is inward, a psychological self-analysis that yearns for conversion, as in the earlier chapters — but the desired movement of soul is not forthcoming. By the time we reach the volume's closing chapters, the individualistic response has broadened: institutionalized re-

ligion has become not only irrelevant, but a hindrance to self-understanding and any hope for epiphany. In the place of religion, the scriptural Word continues to speak – but no longer with the commanding eloquence of unique revelation. What had formerly been accepted as sacred has become, for many contemporary writers, an unusually rich story from which one's own imagination can extrapolate – one tool, among others, for the modern prophet's idiosyncratic search. Validation of truth has moved away from the community.

In Toynbee's scheme civilizations go into decline when they fail to meet increasingly complex challenges, challenges that gradually become more spiritual in nature. Briefly put, they collapse not because of external problems, but because of inherent defects in their members and a lack of creative leadership (Nash 1969: 177). Is this, in fact, what the Reformation and Counterreformation presaged, the petrified life-in-death described by Toynbee as a way-station between breakdown and dissolution? Many would say so; several of the contributors to this volume may be among them. Others, pointing to the promise Jesus made to bring not peace but the sword, may use the same data to draw other conclusions. Incompatible heuristics are the engine driving world religions; they exemplify the history of contention to which this volume's subtitle and Preface refer. Does this possible pattern suggest that religion is being replaced in society by an increasing pietism, or even gnosticism, among its members?

In its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) participants in the Second Vatican Council humbly approached the hermeneutics involved in the search for meaning in history: "That the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other is a fact accessible to faith alone. It remains a mystery of human history, which sin will keep in great disarray until the splendor of God's sons is fully revealed" (Abbott 1967: 239). It will come as no surprise that Karl Rahner, an architect of the Council, took the same faith-stance:

...man's historicity stands in need of healing which is not to be looked for from the internal dynamism of history. So that it becomes clear that revelation alone brings man's historicity to itself by showing the genuine end of history to be the final consummation of history and the world in salvation...as a theological term man's historicity means that man remains open to God's disposal in such a way that he may expect the salvation of himself, of his world and history from an historical and personal event. (Rahner 1983: 209–210)

In less metaphysical language, Ernst Troeltsch notes that "the connection of religious belief with particular historical events is only mediate and relative" (Troeltsch 1991: 19); Jaroslav Pelikan holds much the same view: "...defining the nature of the truth of revelation and identifying the locus of dogmatic authority are not problems that yield their resolutions to the research of the historian" (Pelikan 1971: 156). This is a relatively new understanding of the inherent limitations of religious assertion,¹ a recognition that the proper realm for such language is not the same as that of history or, at least, that its methodology cannot attain the same kind of certainty that the scientific methodology employed by history may wish to claim. As we have noted, literature has never made the sort of truth claims that the scientist does, and argues instead for different types of truth.

Of course, the claims of the historian must be carefully tempered, as an increasing cohort of participants and observers have pointed out. Dennis Nineham, for example, notes that

what any historian is concerned with is past events, but the modern historian emphasizes that once an event is past we can have no *direct* access to it or relationship with it. All we can have are data relating to it (Nineham 1977: 78)...the 'facts' as established by the historian can no more be identified with the original 'event' than the data can. An event is something which can never be compassed in its fullness even by those present when it occurs; and certainly no structure of words, whether those of the historian or his sources, can ever encompass an event. (Nineham 1977: 81)

But this narrowing of the rules of evidence has resulted in confusion: an ever-more-regressive deconstruction of the truths we hold most dear. Nietzsche was one of the first blatantly to rejoice in this fact:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms — in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are: metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power. (Palsey 1978: 70)

Nietzsche seems instinctively to use literary language to explain himself, and the analogy is a natural one. T.R. Wright notes that "modern literary

theory... has emphasized the illusory nature of realism while recent historiography has stressed the fictiveness of history" (Wright 1988: 84). The philosophical assault to which Wright refers is applied specifically to history by Michel Foucault with the *Schadenfreude* we have come to associate with postmodernism: "We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (Foucault 1977: 156 – 157, cited in Wright 1988: 84). The balloon is well-inflated, the wind is up, but the compass cannot find magnetic north. Where does this "drift" lead us today?

An increased historical consciousness increases this disorientation. As Dennis Nineham remarks, "...one century's understanding of an historical event never commends itself in its entirety to the historians of the next century..." (Nineham 1977: 84). As the chapters of this book demonstrate, revisionist readings become especially pronounced in the study of the written and spoken word. The literary "canon" is put in question; the politics of publication interrogate the clarity of literary evaluation. "No classic text," in the view of David Tracy,

comes to us without the plural and ambiguous history of effects of its own production and all its former receptions...Historical ambiguity means that a once seemingly clear historical narrative of progressive Western enlightenment and emancipation has now become a montage of classics and newspeak, of startling beauty and revolting cruelty, of partial emancipation and ever subtler forms of entrapment. (Tracy 1987: 69 – 70)

But the limitations of human understanding have been a *donnée* since Adam and Eve. Those who argue from a confessional framework situate this newly-humbled overview of history, with its "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1970: 32 – 36), within a posited teleology, a "salvation" history (*Heilsgeschichte*). Seeking to trace a line of significance threading its way through the accumulating details of time, writers like John Henry Newman, in his "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine" (1845), describe parameters to discern both change and continuity in theological assertions over time. As Jaroslav Pelikan notes (1969: 12 – 37), any meaningful objectivity in Newman's proposed line of inquiry is fraught with difficulties. His criteria of "authenticity" in the historical development of doctrine are the following: 1) the preservation of type or idea

(but this was objected to by Luther, Sebastian Franck, John Headley, Franklin Littell, G.J. Heering, and others); 2) continuity of principles (contested by Francois Guizot, Schleiermacher, and others); 3) assimilative power (refuted by Harnack, Karl Holl, and others); 4) early anticipation (disputed by Martin Chemnitz and others); 5) logical sequence (objected to by Luther); 6) preservative additions (refuted by Franz Pieper); 7) chronic continuance (contested by Harnack and Gerhard Ebeling). Pelikan can affirm that "the fact of development of doctrine...is beyond dispute" (Pelikan 1969: 41), but he remains convinced that parameters for discovering a goal in such development, let alone discerning God's purposes in history, rely upon a confessional foundation.²

If the very facts upon which history is built are increasingly in question, the truth of traditional faith claims inevitably remains a bone of contention for many; the assertion that "faith informs understanding" does not satisfy some investigators. For someone like Troeltsch the distinction between the confessional and the scientific has too frequently been blurred. In his view,

the theological investigations of recent centuries are replete with this special methodology geared to the history of salvation, which vitiates and distorts the methodology of secular history in various ways, and with distinctive Christian theories of knowledge supposedly based either on the principle of ecclesiastical obedience or on regeneration and inner experience. (Troeltsch 1991: 23)³

In any case, the chapters of this book demonstrate the fact, and imply the process, of *the development of the religious imagination*, which some would describe as a development of doctrine. Harnack dismissed doctrinal continuity as bullheaded tenacity; in refuting this view, Pelikan suggests that Harnack missed the point. Pelikan notes that the change is organic (and fairly inevitable), not mechanical or planned: "it does not do so on the basis of the a priori logic prescribed by the theologian, but on the basis of an a posteriori logic to be described by the historian" (Pelikan 1969: 51). The result is not tidy. Doctrinal "continuity" cuts across institutional professions, in spite of intransigent statements to the contrary, and the religious imagination, however timeless its inspiration, cannot help but reflect its age — and its age's limitations. On the one hand, underlying the controversies of the sixteenth century were convictions upon which both sides agreed (the Virgin Birth, for example); but those agreements may now have been extrapolated beyond possible agreement

(the declaration of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and of the Assumption in 1950, for example, have pushed the two "sides" apart). On the other hand, Protestant Bible criticism has divided its own community but pushed Catholicism closer to it. The supposed *continuity* of doctrine often demands rather elaborate defence. Twentieth century Christians might ask themselves whether they identify more readily with the doctrines reflected in this book's early chapters, or with those in the latter half: believers imagine God differently now.

If recent writers can be believed, many of the views of Troeltsch have now become acceptable across a wide doctrinal spectrum. One Jesuit, for example, concludes that one of the second Vatican Council's principal achievements was a "recognition" of history, with certain consequences in the Christian imagination:

Firstly, the recognition of history and the location of faith within it, rather than alongside it or in opposition to it, meant a renewal of true historical memory rather than mere adaptation. Secondly, a respect for history makes it impossible to reduce diversity and plurality to certain universal formulae. Finally, no separation is possible between religious history and the history of the world at large. We can no longer use the categories which help to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. (Sheldrake 1991: 29)

But removing the border between the sacred and the profane has disturbing consequences, to say the least. For some, like Wolhart Pannenberg, the apparent disenfranchisement is overcome by what would seem to be a sacralizing of the profane. Revelation, for him, "should not be limited to a special series of events cut off from the rest of history but include *all* history, which is not so much Hegel's 'self-revelation of the absolute' as a narrative interpretation of the significance of world-events" (Wright 1988: 90). The assumption would seem to be that objective Truth cannot be tied down to any comprehensive view of history, let alone to any especially pregnant moments in time, but meaning can nonetheless be, for lack of a better word, "realized" in the telling of a narrative that pieces parts of time together. For Ricoeur, Arthur Danto, Hayden White and others, meaning is conveyed only in the telling of, in the context of, a "story."

If Pannenberg would allow us to extend his definition of revelation to the stories that have come under discussion in this volume, we would have to assert that they have been historicized attempts to recognize

meaning, not to invent it. As Stephen Crites writes, "people do not sit down on a cool afternoon and think themselves up a sacred story. They awaken to a sacred story, and their most significant mundane stories are told in the effort, never fully successful, to articulate it" (Crites 1971: 295–296). But if meaning is only demonstrated in the actual telling of stories, many of our contemporaries would protest that such subjective testimonials are hardly acceptable as unbiased evidence of Ultimate meaning. In putting the case in these terms, we have moved beyond the strict categories of "the historical method" endorsed by Troeltsch and moved into the realm of hermeneutics and narratology.⁴ Yet Troeltsch certainly imagined time as "storical," to coin a term: "...unique forces also stand in a current and context comprehending the totality of events, where we see everything conditioned by everything else so that there is no point within history which is beyond this correlative involvement and mutual influence" (Troeltsch 1991: 14). No one historian can step beyond the web in which she or he lives, nor can anyone know everything related even to one given moment. His historical method inevitably selects the correlations and mutual influences it chooses to foreground as meaningful "glue."

But Troeltsch makes no bones about his own faith commitment and how that shapes his own story:

I would say that it is the essence of my view that it thoroughly combats historical relativism, which is the consequence of the historical method only within an atheistic or a religiously skeptical framework. Moreover, my view seeks to overcome this relativism through the conception of history as a disclosure of the divine reason. (Troeltsch 1991: 270)

"Divine reason"? What kind of historical method would allow such a concept, except one that recognized the importance of personal commitment and assertion even in a transient world? Sounding much like Toynbee, Troeltsch asserts that

the point is that history is not a chaos but issues from unitary forces and aspires towards a unitary goal. For the believer in religion and ethics, history is an orderly sequence in which the essential truth and profundity of the human spirit rise from its transcendent ground – not without struggle and error, but with the necessary consistency of a development that has had a normal beginning. (Troeltsch 1991: 27)

Thus, even though the historical method "relativizes everything," it does so "not in the sense that it eliminates every standard of judgement and necessarily ends in a nihilistic skepticism, but rather in the sense that every historical structure and moment can be understood only in relation to others and ultimately to the total context." Furthermore, it asserts that "standards of values cannot be derived from isolated events but only from an overview of the historical totality." Most importantly, "it is impossible to arrive at some suprahistorical core" (Troeltsch 1991: 18).

Yet the assertion that history can only "ultimately" be understood in relation to the "total" context implies that it cannot ever be fully understood – except, perhaps, in the next life, the "supra-historical" to which we have no inviting access. How, then, can the fear of relativism be faced in such a profane (but baptized) world? One way, the one that has shaped so much theological history, is by accepting the notion of unique revelation, as defined by one's recognized authority, and then arguing over its meaning. Another way, not necessarily exclusive of the first, is by learning to swim with confidence.

An elaboration upon the second alternative requires a return to Arnold Toynbee. Despite the sorry history he presents of so many Ozymandias's lying desolate in the shifting sands, his organized view of time leaves room for an overall optimism. Critics like Pitirim Sorokin, however, astutely note that supposedly inclusive "systematic" views like Toynbee's are inherently partial, inevitably biased, and finally dishonest to the human condition:

Not only is the total civilization of such enormous 'culture-areas' as the Greco-Roman, or the Sinic, or of any other of his civilizations not one whole or system, but the total civilization of even a smallest possible civilizational area – that of a single individual – is but a coexistence of several and different systems and congeries unrelated with one another in any way except spatial adjacency in a biological organism. (Sorokin 1940: 189–190)

"Having mistakenly taken different congeries for system...", Sorokin writes, Toynbee comes up with "not so much a theory of civilizational change as much as an evaluative theory of civilizational progress or regress" (Sorokin 1940: 191).

Thus, despite the massive scholarship and intimidating length of Toynbee's study, Sorokin and others point out the shaping prejudices that no historian, no human being, can escape: our imaginations provide the

wonderfully creative and individually tailored selection that we each take from reality. The alternative to the false confidence of a constructed view of Truth, therefore, is not the abandonment of systems, but a recognition of their inadequacy. Historical consciousness is not only a source for malaise, a misfiring of overloaded circuits. In the specific case that Sorokin discusses, for example, "quite a large number of Egyptian or Babylonian or especially Hellenic cultural systems traits...are very much alive as components of the contemporary Western or other cultures. And they are alive not as objects in a museum but as living realities in our and other cultures" (Sorokin 1940: 193) — in much the same way that *Pilgrim's Progress* and the story of Adam and Eve, threading their way through several of our chapters, speak anew (but differently) in each age. The civilization in which they originated has collapsed, but the "artifacts" have not.

The success one age may or may not have in retrieving the significance of that artifact will vary, as Christianity's experience with the Bible has repeatedly shown. But, as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, "every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out" (Gadamer 1975: 273). In his analysis of this experience Gadamer is, in general, more optimistic than many. He writes, for example, that "in the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed" (Gadamer 1975: 273).

But just how often does this "process of understanding" take place? Since he imagines the "fusing of horizons" as a form of translation, it is not surprising that Gadamer believes that

the existence of literature in translation shows that something is presented in such works that is true and valid for all time. Thus it is by no means the case that world literature is an alienated form of that which constitutes the mode of being of a work according to its original purpose. It is rather the historical mode of being of literature that makes it possible for something to belong to world literature. (Gadamer 1975: 144)

Gadamer embraces the humanistic idea of a common human condition, one that can be shared if we only find the best tools for translation. On

this point, recent critics are skeptical, pointing to the experience of colonization as a demonstration that politics inevitably subvert the desired "fusion" (see Niranjana 1992, for example). In terms of a specifically religious imagination, this act of "translating" eternal truths from one culture (or time) to another has historically shared a great deal with the clumsiness, naiveté, and cruelty of colonizers.

Thus, "artifacts" is not a suitable term for the truths that can be shared across cultural or temporal borders. Happily, the tempered optimism of David Tracy seems more cognizant of the biological home in which our imaginations live, and in which they are shaped by emotions beyond our understanding or control. This is the condition touched upon by Sorokin and analyzed at length by Freud. "We begin to suspect," writes Tracy,

that consciousness itself is radically intertextual. Perhaps it only seems this way because we will not face the dispossession of the ego by all the plural and ambiguous texts that have usurped its will to domination disguised as the self's will to truth. Reason can be so driven by a debilitating optimism that it will not dwell for long upon either the radical interruptions of history or the unconscious distortions of self and culture. It is not merely that reason will not sometimes stay for an answer, but that it will not even wait for a question. (Tracy 1987: 78)

"Debilitating optimism" is a refreshingly iconoclastic description of the human tendency to shut down discussion when it frightens us. But is the alternative an "energizing pessimism"? Perhaps this would be another way to describe the skepticism which many today, leery of the forced march of institutionalized "truths" through our bloody history, have embraced with anger, resignation, or hope. What we have at work here is something far more profound, far less adolescent, than Swinburne's outrageous blasphemy in "Hymn to Proserpine": "Thou' hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath." In the view of many, the world "will not even wait for [the] question" posed by the Galilean before marching off to foreclose in his name. Faced with this self-serving orthodoxy, many others happily allow the religious imagination to speak in unorthodox ways.

If, as our writers here contend, theologizing is an act of imagination, and if, like any act of imagination, it is situated in, and thereby shaped by, its historical and social context, it follows that this social act has responsibilities both to the historical record and to the present. It is easy

enough to condemn sects that retreat to a mountaintop to await the world's end; it is less simple to approach, with honesty, the shared limitations that plague our own theologies. It is with this recognition that Ernest Gellner, while ridiculing the gnosticism of postmodernist jargon, endorses what he identifies as Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism, which absolutizes no substantive convictions, but does absolutize some formal principles of knowledge, procedure, and moral valuation.

Sounding more than a little like Voltaire, Gellner sets down as his manifesto the observation that "the world does not arrive as a package-deal – which is the customary manner in which it appears in traditional cultures – but piecemeal. Strictly speaking, though it *arrives* as a package-deal, it is dismembered by thought" (Gellner 1992: 80). Dismemberment is hardly an attractive term for the process, but it does take on a greater charm if one imagines pointing it in the direction of some belief-system other than one's own; this, at least, has historically been a human tendency. But one can quickly see how apposite is Gellner's description of the process. Leaving very little to the reader's imagination, he proposes the following as the consequences of his approach:

...it desacralizes, disestablishes, disenchant[s] everything substantive: no privileged facts, occasions, individuals, institutions or associations. In other words, no miracles, no divine interventions and conjuring performances and press conferences, no saviours, no sacred churches or sacramental communities. All hypotheses are subject to scrutiny, all facts open to novel interpretations, and all facts subject to symmetrical laws which preclude the miraculous, the sacred occasion, the intrusion of the Other into the Mundane. (Gellner 1992: 81)

Put this way, "Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism" sounds a bit like a postmodern reversal of Coleridge – in effect, a perpetual suspension of *belief* – and one wonders whether or not any individual could have the purity of intention that seems to be required of this approach's devotees. Who wants to live in a desert, clean as it may be? Nonetheless, Gellner also offers a more nuanced characterization:

It shares with monotheistic exclusive scriptural religion the belief in the existence of a unique truth, instead of an endless plurality of meaning-systems; but it repudiates the idea that this unique vision is related to a privileged Source, and could even be definitive. It

shares with hermeneutic relativism the repudiation of the claim that a *substantive*, final and definitive version of the truth is available. It is, however, separated from it by refusing to endorse, as equally valid, each pre-Enlightenment, socially enmeshed, cognitive cocoon of meanings. (Gellner 1992: 84)

Thus, it is “absolutist and nonrelativistic in procedure, and permanently *attentiste* rather than relativist in its substantive, first-order conviction” (Gellner 1992: 80). Gellner seems to be positing the existence of objective truths – asserting a faith that provides a hopeful foundation for our life’s search, even if we never encounter those truths in an ultimately convincing way. If this sounds like a reactionary enthronement of Reason, it should; when push comes to shove, in fact, Gellner hedges and suggests that the reader should not let this all become too abstract. “Societies,” after all, “are systems of real constraints, operating in a unique nature, and must be understood as such, and not simply as systems of meaning” (Gellner 1992: 95) – we do have to get on with life and act *as if* it all held together, at least for the moment, and at least for oneself. But we must always remain willing to “dismember” our perceptions when presented with new views. As unsatisfying as this blatant return to an Enlightenment pre-postmodern world may be, it does have the appeal of clearing the decks and taking a fresh look at all preconceptions and constricted creeds, the debris of our dialectical history. It may also remind us of Karl Rahner’s recommendation, mentioned early in this concluding chapter, that the believer “remain open to God’s disposal” (Rahner 1983: 210) – which may, here, be a rather disturbing pun.

More balanced, however, is David Tracy’s suggestion that “to interpret well must now mean that we attend to and use the hermeneutics of both retrieval and suspicion” (Tracy 1987: 77). Retrieval does not demand the maintenance of oppressive institutional and interpretive structures. It does suggest, in fact, that Gadamer’s notion of “fusion” is not without merit, especially if carried out with the suspicion so clearly defined by Gellner. As we have seen with Pitirim Sorokin, “civilizations” do not collapse and disappear as absolutely as Toynbee implied. But the ongoing evolution of a postmodern Christianity will necessarily be a patchwork affair rather than a monolithic structure or a monologic conversation. The chapters in this volume suggest that this has been the pattern for the development of Christianity: the religious imagination always implies a conversation.

If, as David Tracy recognizes, “the split self of postmodernity is caught between conscious activity and a growing realization of the radical oth-

erness not only around but within us" (Tracy 1987: 77), this does not mean that the alternative to "standing up for what we believe in" is a gutless surrender to someone else's imagination. Instead, "our theories and our conversations can become... what they in fact always were: limited, fragile, necessary exercises in reaching relatively adequate knowledge of language and history alike" (Tracy 1987: 81). And this "relatively adequate knowledge" suggests Diana Eck's helpful distinction between relativism and pluralism. "For the nihilistic relativist," she writes, "the impossibility of universalizing any one truth claim suggests the emptiness of all truth claims" (Eck 1993: 194), but

the pluralist, on the other hand, stands in a particular community, even as restless critic. I would argue that there is no such thing as a generic pluralist. There are Christian pluralists, Hindu pluralists, and even avowedly humanistic pluralists — all daring to be themselves, not in isolation from but in relation to one another. Pluralists recognize that others also have communities and commitments. They are unafraid to encounter one another and realize that they must all live with each other's particularities. The challenge for the pluralist is commitment without dogmatism and community without communalism. The theological task, and the task of a pluralist society, is to create the space and the means for the encounter of commitments, not to neutralize all commitment. (Eck 1993: 195)

It is in storytelling and in explaining ourselves to one another that this encounter of commitments continues to become possible, pointing toward that which remains transcendent.

Notes

1. Pelikan notes that "...history was assigned a lesser reality than the superhistorical realm, from which the truth of revelation was thought to have come. If the life and the structures of the Church were involved in the historical process, as no one could deny that they were, one needed nevertheless to insist that the Church as such belonged to the transcendent order of reality, despite its participation in the immanent order. So also, the doctrines of the Church had to be grounded in the 'really real' beyond history, even though they were regrettably historical, all too historical, in their genesis and development" (Pelikan 1971: 157).
2. For more on this topic, see, among others, Pelikan 1969: 12–24 and Crowley 1992.

3. Yet he also calls Christianity "the supreme religious force of history" (Troeltsch 1991: 26) and endorses an "inner" experience: in the person of Jesus "a God distinct from nature produced a personality superior to nature with eternally transcendent goals and the willpower to change the world. Here a religious power manifests itself, which to anyone sensitive enough to catch its echo in one's own soul, seems to be the conclusion of all previous religious movements and the starting point of a new phase in the history of religion, in which nothing has yet emerged. Indeed, even for us today it is unthinkable that something higher should emerge, no matter how many new forms and combinations this purely inward and personal belief in God may yet enter" (Troeltsch 1991: 28).
4. "It is important to recognize that the stories told by historians have a basic epistemological difference from literary fictions. There is a specific external reference, an 'objectivity' which can be investigated, checked, challenged and modified. Historical accounts interlock like maps; the discoveries of separate investigators can be combined. There is a fundamental similarity in narrative mode but a fundamental difference in the object of 'reference' between the stories we call 'history' and those we call 'fiction'" (Wright 1988: 91). Gadamer, also, notes that "The difference between a literary work of art and any other literary text is not so fundamental...the essential difference of these various 'languages'...lies...in the distinction between the claims to truth that each makes. All literary works have a profound community in that the linguistic form makes effective the significance of the contents to be expressed. In this light, the understanding of texts by, say, a historian is not so very different from the experience of art. And it is not mere chance that the concept of literature embraces not only works of literary art, but everything that has been transmitted in writing" (Gadamer 1975: 145). Veesper, also, suggests that "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices," so that "literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably." But he goes further, and writes that "no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature" (Veeser 1989: Preface).

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